

Knowing virtue

Ralph Walker

Ever worried about 'virtue'? Let's worry a bit more with fifth-century philosopher, Plato....

Plato's dialogue *Meno* starts out with a question. Meno, a wealthy young man, asks Socrates whether virtue can be taught. (Sometimes the word for virtue is translated 'excellence': the Greek word *areté* is broader than our word 'virtue'.) The dialogue's official purpose is to answer this question, though it ends with a very unsatisfactory answer. In the meantime, however, Socrates introduces a number of other questions which are both fundamental and important. What is virtue? What is knowledge? What is it to define something? And how are we to tackle questions of this sort anyway? They are philosophical questions, and they need answers. But they can't be answered by looking at the world or by doing experiments. In this respect, philosophy is like mathematics. Mathematics and philosophy seek knowledge that cannot come from sense experience. But if the knowledge doesn't come from sense experience where does it come from, and how can we find it?

The natural answer is that it comes from thinking, and that we find it by thinking. But then we must ask, what is it about our thinking that entitles us to say it gives us knowledge? Knowledge has to be true, true of the world beyond our own minds. But thinking is something that goes on inside our minds. Often we are very confident that our thought patterns do give us genuine truth. Why should we be? What justifies us?

In search of the truth

This is one of the most basic problems of philosophy. It has not yet been solved. The *Meno* is the first work to set it out, and Plato offers us a solution. Within the dialogue the solution is given by Socrates, but it seems almost certain that Plato is using the character of Socrates as his own mouthpiece, not trying to give an accurate account of what the historical Socrates thought. But whoever thought up the solution, it plainly won't do, and I think Plato must have been aware it wouldn't do. He wanted us to think about the problem.

The historical Socrates thought it important to discuss things, to stimulate people to think. Plato's Socrates takes the same view. So does Plato himself, and this needs to be borne in mind in reading him. He wants us to find out the truth for ourselves. But in that case we should expect him not just to tell us his own views. We should expect him on occasion to tell us things he disagrees with, things that are evidently wrong, in order to stimulate and challenge us.

Some scholars do think Plato just gives us his own views; but sometimes that seems very unlikely. The *Meno*'s final answer to the question whether virtue can be taught is that it can't, because it is not knowledge but a sort of irrational opinion that arrives by divine inspiration. We cannot be meant to take this seriously. Elsewhere Plato clearly thinks virtue is very much a rational matter, and equates it with knowledge, not opinion. Divine inspiration has nothing to do with it. In fact the *Meno*'s conclusion is reached by an argument so bad that we must surely be expected to raise an eyebrow. Virtue, it is said, is not knowledge, because knowledge can be taught; but neither the sophists (a professional class of teachers) nor the gentry are able to teach it; therefore nobody can, and it cannot be taught. Are the sophists and the gentry the only possible teachers?

Finding an answer

Earlier in the *Meno* there is a brief discussion between Socrates and a slave-boy. This is meant to show how people can reach the truth through dialogue. Socrates helps the slave-boy to think something out for himself, so that he does not just learn it by rote but comes to understand that it is right. Socrates gets him to understand something about the relation between the area of a square, its diagonal and its side, and he does this by helping the slave to work it out.

If, though, we can get to the truth just by working things out, either by ourselves or in dialogue with others, how do we manage it? No doubt the patterns of our thinking do match reality well enough to allow us to answer certain types of question without appeal to sense-experience. This seems particularly clear with mathematical questions. Nobody explores the world around us to check whether $173 = 4913$. But it remains puzzling why our thought should match reality so well.

So far as mathematical questions are concerned, there would be no problem if mathematics were just a made-up game. For then there would be no such thing as mathematical truth: we should just be inventing the answers, playing our own game. Some people think (and some people thought in Plato's time) that there is no such thing as moral truth, for just this reason. Morality is very much a matter for philosophy, but some people have suggested in the same way that there is no such thing as philosophical truth at all. One thing Plato is pointing out to us here is that philosophy, morality and mathematics are to this extent parallel.

If we did think that mathematics were just a made-up game we should be faced with a very big problem. If we have just invented it, why should it turn out to be so useful in helping us to understand and manipulate the world around us? It is sometimes said that at least numbers like the square root of 1 are just invented by us, but they turn out to have important practical applications in Engineering and Mathematics. Why should that be, unless there are genuine truths about them, truths that we do not make up?

These truths that we can know without having to check them out empirically are sometimes called *a priori* truths. So, how can we know *a priori* truths? To suppose that we do is to suppose that our minds work in a way that matches the world itself. Why should they do that? Plato suggests an answer. We know these truths by recollection. In some previous existence we were directly exposed to them. We have now forgotten them almost entirely, but discussion with others can prompt our memories so that we can come to recollect them again. Confusingly he seems to propose a second and incompatible variant at the same time: our souls have always known these truths, but again we need to go through a process of recollecting to become clear about them. This second variant gets us nowhere. If the problem is how we know something, it's no help to say that we have always known it. But to say we were directly exposed, before birth, to the fact that $173 = 4913$ is just baffling. Whatever you may think about a previous life, what could it be like to meet a fact like that? The confused presentation of the two variants together suggests that Plato is posing us a problem rather than offering us a serious solution. This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that Socrates is quite unusually hesitant about putting forward these ideas. Hesitancy is not a common characteristic of Socrates, as Plato portrays him.

I doubt if Plato had an answer. The problem is serious; mathematics, and philosophy too, depend upon there being an answer. After Plato philosophers have usually just ignored the problem. French thinker, Descartes (1596–1650) faced it: he thought that mathematics, and so (in his view) science, is possible just because there is a benevolent God, who guarantees a match between the way we think and the way the world is. Isaac Newton thought the same. Prussian philosopher, Kant (1724–1804) proposed another solution: the world matches the way we think because, to a great extent, it is a product of our human ways of thinking. We read into the world certain of our ways of thinking, so that our minds play an unexpectedly large part in creating the natural universe.

Plato's theory, or theories, of recollection seem far removed from common sense. But the suggestions of Descartes and of Kant seem pretty distant from common sense as well. So what solution can there be? This is the most important problem that Plato's *Meno* leaves us with.

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